

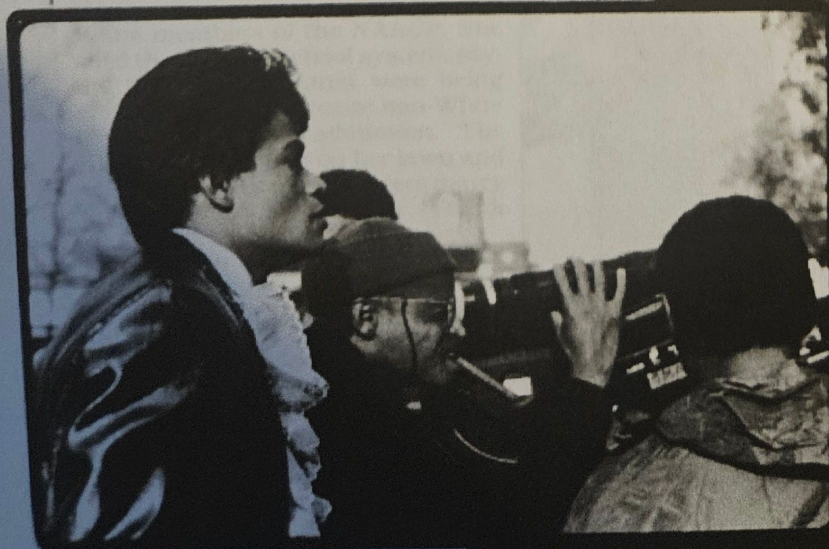
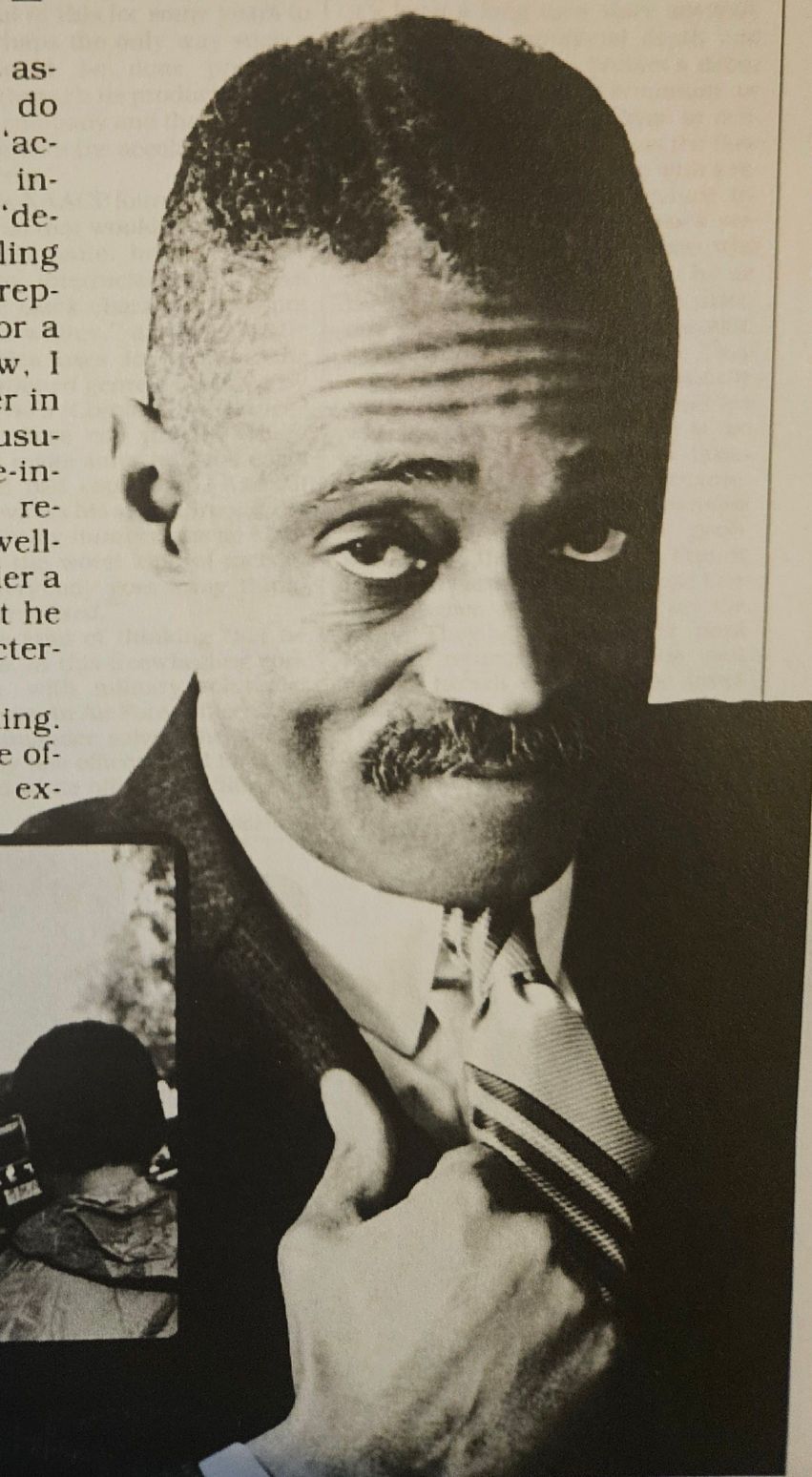
MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: THE **BAADASSSSS**

by
Karen Jaehne

GENT

Melvin Van Peebles resists assimilation, refuses to do things the accepted and 'acceptable' way, a principle that includes interviews. Yet he always 'delivers' in unexpected and revealing ways that preserve his maverick reputation. When I cornered him for a few hours for a career interview, I brought out the resistance fighter in him and tapped an evasive skill usually employed by about-to-be-indicted politicians. As the tape recorder spun, Van Peebles in a well-tailored suit peered out from under a fabulous fedora and insisted that he does not analyze, label, or characterize his artistic work.

"What you see in it is interesting. Or at least not uninteresting," he offered, "but don't expect me to ex-



Melvin Van Peebles (center)
on location for *Identity Crisis*

plain it. That's not my job. I'm just the baadasssss artist." His grin cannot help but betray that he knows this is b.s. as well as I do, but it puts the onus of interpretation on the critic. "You're going to write about me and my work, and I'm not going to tell you what to write."

Asked if he would help me describe him and get the facts straight, he shrugged diffidently. "Fact? What's a fact? A version? After I say I was born in 1932, it just becomes a question of point-of-view. . . . Yes, I went to college, Ohio Wesleyan University, but all this is in the book that's coming out with my latest film." Van Peebles's latest film, made together with his thirty-two-year-old son Mario Van Peebles is called *Identity Crisis*, about a gay French couturier popping in and out of a black rapper's body—sort of *All of Me* meets Run DMC—written by Mario.

They have also assembled a book entitled *No Identity Crisis*, published by Simon and Schuster, about how the film was made and, in its expansive passages, how their relationship was built over the years into a model of mutual respect and character-building exasperation. A great deal of biographical material, the kind of thing Van Peebles is famous for not discussing, is spliced into the entries by Mario and longtime colleagues also involved in the film.

We discover, for example, that Mario's mother came from "old money WASPs, liberals who believed in higher education and civil rights. My granddad fled Germany when Hitler was coming to power, taught political science at both Harvard and Yale, and became a budget analyst for Harry Truman. His wife, my mother's mother, graduated from Columbia University and was one of the few White members of the NAACP. She sued the Virginia school system, saying her White children were being denied education because non-White kids were denied admission. The KKK burned a cross on her lawn and said, 'We hope your daughters marry niggers.' She replied politely, 'Thank you, so do we.'"

One of those daughters, Maria, met Van Peebles in 1955 when he was an aviator in the Air Force and subsequently had three children while the Van Peebles travelled. "I'd developed an interest in astronomy in the service, so I went to Holland to study. I started writing, went to Paris, you know, people did that sort of thing, and there were all kinds of opportunities. So I became a journalist for a while, tried to deal with *ffaaccts*." His pronunciation of the word hints at the origins of "baad-

asssss." "That's how I learned what's fact," he concludes, "and what's not. And not to worry about it."

Studying and writing novels in Europe would lead to writing and directing a film in France, oddly fulfilling the prophetic analysis of Walter White, a major figure in the NAACP, who wrote in a letter in 1929, "Perhaps in time we may evolve to the point where moving pictures producers and distributors may have the intelligence and courage enough to utilize the excellent material . . . written about the Negro by Negro and white writers. . . . I am not hopeful of this for some years to come. Perhaps the only way such a picture could be done probably would be through its production by a European company and then brought to America with the accolade of European success."

Had this NAACP founder specified the material that would require such a circuitous route, he might have pointed to interracial conflicts in which the black character need not "out-white whitey," a characteristic Van Peebles uses to describe the well-intentioned genre delineated by *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* and "all those cop movies where they now make sure the good cop's black and bad cop's Irish. And all this," he waves his arms through the air, "paint-by-number racial balance. It's the worst kind of racism, 'cause everybody goes away thinking it's been fixed."

It's the kind of thinking that he associates, in this freewheeling conversation, with military solutions: "When I was an Air Force officer, one base commander solved the dilemma of only one officers pool for both black and white officers by filling in

the pool with concrete. That's how this society thinks, and that's how Hollywood thinks. You can't claim to be satisfying the black audience by only producing Eddie Murphy blockbusters. They're OK. I like him; I like Spike Lee; I like my son Mario, who just did a big \$9 million picture. See, all these guys do their thing, but that doesn't cover all the numbers on the table."

Despite salient characteristics in the style of Van Peebles and Spike Lee and, for that matter, in the work of any black filmmakers that build their stories around the black stud, it's been a long time since anybody achieved the emotional depth and pain of Melvin Van Peebles's debut film, the 1967 *La Permission* or *Story of a Three Day Pass*. In delicate black and white, it has the flow of a French New Wave film with a remarkably moving performance by Harry Baird as Turner, a black serviceman stationed in France who speaks little French but gets by on the language of love during a three-day pass and affair with a beautiful Parisian girl named Miriam. They meet intense racial jealousy, mostly on the part of Turner's white buddies who happen to run into them at the seashore where Turner has taken Miriam for an interlude of romance. The scene on the beach is handled with deft assurance as the goofy soldiers rip through a pretty French village toward the beach where they find Turner stretched out on the sand. They glad-hand him until Miriam returns to his side and throws herself down on the towel close to him expressing affection. Their shocked anger at the idea of Turner getting laid—and with a beautiful French woman!—tips the

Harry Baird and Nicole Berger in *Story of a Three Day Pass* (1967)



film into the high gear of racist politics from its previously low gear of a charmingly sweet interracial love story.

Turner is also aware of how their resentment can affect him back at camp, and his worry steams up into fury later that evening at a boite, when a Spanish flamenco singer dedicates a song to "le petit noir." He attacks the man and their brawl gets Turner and Miriam thrown out of the club. Over Miriam's attempts to explain the Spaniard's intentions (which are not that clear and beg the question if he himself is not a minority who feels persecution from the dominant French bourgeoisie), Turner wails out, "How can anyone think that black is a compliment?"

This basically sober, elegant etching of an African-American abroad is laced with the comedic elements that would dominate Van Peebles's later work. For example, the film opens with a self-important army captain spouting off patronizing promises and clichés into the camera: eyeball to eyeball with this annoying man who is lecturing Turner on the behavior proper to someone of his race, we establish the point-of-view of Turner's position within the rigidly stratified military.

Van Peebles explores the feelings and sexual vulnerabilities of his black hero with finesse and passion. First, we feel Turner's insecurity as an American more than a black, then see the question of race insert itself when he meets a girl who is unconcerned about it. In an early scene, he explains the Captain's opinion of him: "He thinks I'm a good Negro," i.e. too afraid to go out with a white girl, so Turner has been duly promoted and given this three-day pass, i.e. three days to prove he's worthy of Captain's trust. That's what the Captain said: "Trust or bust." And yet, Turner's rebelliousness is not so much that of a black man as of a soldier exasperated with helmet-headed institutions.

In the final sequence, after Turner has returned to camp and been busted as a result of his pals alerting everyone to his seaside liaison, Turner has been restricted to quarters (the Army's version of prejudicial detainment) until a bus arrives full of black matrons, the First American Crusading Church of Harlem Royal Crusading Tour. The Captain calls on Turner to show the group around, a sort of 'see to your own kind' chore that leads to a Mrs. Abernathy taking it upon herself to get his restriction lifted. We see the paternalism of the military bow to the 'maternalism' of Turner's world, but he doesn't like either one. And

when he phones his girlfriend and can't get through to her, his confidence is dented by the cynical advice he's been given not to trust women or, for that matter, other people.

"Fuck you," says Turner to the guy offering the advice, nothing other than a guy Turner sees in the mirror, his own image but more skeptical, more savvy and more disillusioned than "the nice young man" Mrs. Abernathy says she has heard about. Besides the distilled anger of the ending, other stylistic traits lay out the visual vocabulary of Van Peebles. A guy in the mirror that permits us to see the 'inner man' or 'other' self of a schizophrenic hero foreshadows the cockroach devils underneath the two guests in *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1972).

A cleverly edited fantasy sequence just before Turner takes Miriam to bed shows us Turner's imagination working overtime: he sees himself as a regally plumed Musketeer saving a damsel, as a native chieftain rescuing a white girl from a boiling pot, and so on. A high shot of the room shows the bedclothes turned down one way, jump cut to a different way of folding back the bedding, jump cut to yet another perhaps less obviously seductive fashion, all with hilarious effect, partly because these sequences are somehow unexpected within the discreet, Truffaut-esque romantic plot. This discussion of *Story of a Three Day Pass* has been more thorough than one might expect, in part, because it is significantly different from his better known films to the degree it is crafted as a European art film and, secondly, because it is virtually ignored in film

books that one might expect to discuss it within the context of Van Peebles's work. Indeed, perusing a wide range of books on black cinema or American indies, one gets the distinct impression critics skip over it because they've not seen it.

The film was invited as a French entry at the San Francisco Festival which was run at that time by the highly respected black film critic Albert Johnson. It brought Van Peebles acclaim even from the Hollywood establishment that had once told him, "We don't need any elevator operators here," when he had gone there in search of work after making two shorts, *Sunlight* and *Three Pickup Men for Herrik* (both 1958). Having published four novels in French and worked for *France Observateur*, Van Peebles had established himself as an artist outside the Hollywood system's "nice nigger mold," as he calls it.

"One of the reasons I originally wanted to make films was that I got tired of what Hollywood was doing. I got up to leave the cinema one day after one of those movies where bad and black are equated, and I knew I could just do better. At least, I knew it wouldn't be hard to do better than that. And I knew there were people like me who would be glad to see a more realistic picture of black experience, so I decided to make movies. ... It took me ten years to get a chance to do it their way, and what I discovered at Columbia Pictures is that their way gets in my way. ... I don't have much to say anymore about Herman Raucher's screenplay [for *Watermelon Man*] — I can't remember — I just did my best and got

Godfrey Cambridge and Estelle Parsons in *Watermelon Man* (1970)



on with my own *independent* career." What may have appealed to Van Peebles in Raucher's story is the way he shows black and white as a psychological and sociopolitical schizophrenia within the protagonist.

In the precredit sequence of *Watermelon Man*, Godfrey Cambridge plays a white insurance salesman, Jeff, enjoying a vigorous morning workout. Pummeling a boxing bag, he calls it "Muhammed Ali," and advises, "Be a credit to your race." This little scenario of the white man using the black man as a punching bag while telling him implicitly to distinguish himself from other blacks by acting "white" is also the essential dilemma at the heart of all Van Peebles's films.

The conclusion of the same film also has the militancy toward which all Van Peebles's work drives: After Jeff miraculously becomes a black man and learns that the world now treats him with open hostility, Jeff joins other black men bearing mops and brooms to train as an urban guerilla. A freeze-frame ending has him lunging with his mop handle into the camera threatening us. As a punching bag, of course, Ali is a credit to his race; by fighting back, Jeff is not. The film debunks the notion that white American suburban society can treat black people with equality, no matter their origins, goals and education. To be black is to be marginalized — an idea that took few people by surprise in 1970. The fact that this "young and innovative" film got made in Hollywood has more to do with the studios' rush to keep up with *Easy Rider*'s success than with liberalism.

Watermelon Man is facile, with its message and ideology laid out like a corpse awaiting an autopsy. Because this is the single Van Peebles film that he himself did not script, it reminds us of the phase of the Civil Rights movement of the late Sixties in a neatly constructed liberal fashion that belies his customary anarchic comedy. Godfrey Cambridge apes the consternation of a middle class white businessman in a fashion that we now associate more with *The Cosby Show* than with Melvin Van Peebles. The horrors of black existence sketched in bestsellers such as *The Invisible Man* are given a sitcom packaging complete with one-liners like, "Relax, when the KKK arrives, they don't ring the bell."

Melvin Van Peebles not only celebrates ethnicity; he thumbs his nose at white society's ideas of doing good by do-

ing well. Van Peebles has broken so many rules of filmmaking that, arguably, Spike Lee has only reinvented Van Peebles's wheel, for Van Peebles antedates Lee by about twenty years and, from the beginning, turned a very similar 'in-your-face' anger into his roughhewn, raucous, down and dirty trademark. To expect Van Peebles to adhere to cinematic conventions of continuity, narrative structure, and character development would be equivalent to telling Dadaist artists to work harder on chiaroscuro.

The battles fought by Van Peebles over a black style centered primarily around his chef-d'oeuvre *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* which was promoted as "Rated X by an All-White Jury." The X-rating endowed by the MPAA was still a highly respected pronouncement or, at least, a formidable hurdle for distribution, but the film succeeded despite it. The confrontation was summed up in a letter Van Peebles wrote to MPAA President Jack Valenti, charging, "Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship, that is its business, but White standards shall no longer be imposed on the Black community." Today, Van Peebles chuckles at the fact that the white community has run into trouble with the MPAA and mumbles, "Well, it's about time they got hip. What can a man say?"

Much ink has been spilt over *Sweet Sweetback*, the outrageous movie that redefined black filmmaking. Van Peebles took the money he'd made off *Watermelon Man* — even borrowing \$50,000 from Bill Cosby at one stage — and began to shoot the picture in Los Angeles, telling the unions that he was making a porn movie. "I didn't get picketed," he says. "I didn't even get noticed. Besides, filmmaking was still a white activity, and I was shooting in the ghettos and parts of town nobody dared go into."

Van Peebles also played his hero Sweetback, who begins as a stud in a sex show where he runs into a "routine" arrest by two white cops who then wantonly beat up a black brother. Sweetback attacks the police and then flees. As a fugitive, he is helped by the black community, turns into an underground hero during a dragnet to catch him, and ultimately gets across the border despite patrol dogs and a near fatal stint in the desert. The movie ends with the promise, "A baadaasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues." It became a cause célèbre, debated by both white and black critics in a fashion differing very little from the brouhaha over *Do The Right Thing*

(sic transit gloria...)

"Whites would have to be masochists," opined Archer Winsten in *The New York Post*, "to accept the unrelenting portrait of their fellows." Certainly, the point-of-view of *Sweet Sweetback* saw whites in roles as stereotypically negative as any white film had ever imposed on black characters. More important, however, than the racial content, which seemed to lurch in an ebullient way into celebrations of the seamier side of the ghetto, was the jagged, ragged style that brandished its low budget and low life shenanigans such as stud Sweetback accepting a duel with the leader of a motorcycle pack and choosing "fucking" as the weaponry.

New York Times critic Vincent Canby called it "almost psychotic," but *Cue New York* critic William Wolf found it politically and artistically the most significant film ever made by a black filmmaker. The debate was escalated when Lerone Bennett, writing in *Ebony*, evaluated the film as trivial, tasteless, and a "negative classic," of value to the black community "because it is an obligatory step for anyone who wants to go further and make the first revolutionary black film."

Perhaps most important was that, with this film as well as his important exuberant Broadway musical, *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, Van Peebles laid out the esthetic foundations for new black comedy: ribald, raucous, revolutionary. Certainly not all black comedies achieve all three: Van Peebles's own subsequent work fell short of the revolutionary urgency most people found in *Sweet Sweetback*. *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1972) was adapted from Van Peebles's own play and features stereotypes, from the black stud who crashes the birthday party of a sweet young thing fresh from the South to the middle class black college boy and his uppity parents who try to lord it over the others at the party. The film remains stagebound but engaging in sharing with us the ambience of a Saturday night in Harlem spent singing and dancing away the weary workweek. A good time is had by all, no matter how cluttered the screen (it looks like a real living room) or contrived the plot: a young stud's devilish side keeps emerging in foiled attempts to trash the party. The supervising older devil runs afoul of Esther Rolle's broom when he turns back into a cockroach. The stereotypes that Van Peebles develops in cartoon fashion remind us of the erstwhile confidence of Pop Art, before it became big business.

The intervening years have seen

black filmmakers turn a good bit of business with the same kind of stereotypes that had, in the films of Van Peebles, discomfited the classic liberal establishment. To be sure, the comedy of new black filmmakers besides Spike Lee (Robert Townsend, Eddie Murphy, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Charles Burns) stands on the shoulders of Van Peebles: they even enjoy the same sort of nepotism to people their productions.

The Van Peebles father/son team has produced *Identity Crisis*, another comedy using stereotypes of the fashion world and the rap world with vaudeville humor and the Van Peebles stamp of confusion almost out of control. The portrait of the fashion designer is homophobic; rap artists are less than ludicrous, and the mix ups are predictable, so the film has had a tough time finding distribution—which makes it sound very much like *Sweet Sweetback* minus the anger. It is fun to see such contemporary icons lampooned with such careless abandon.

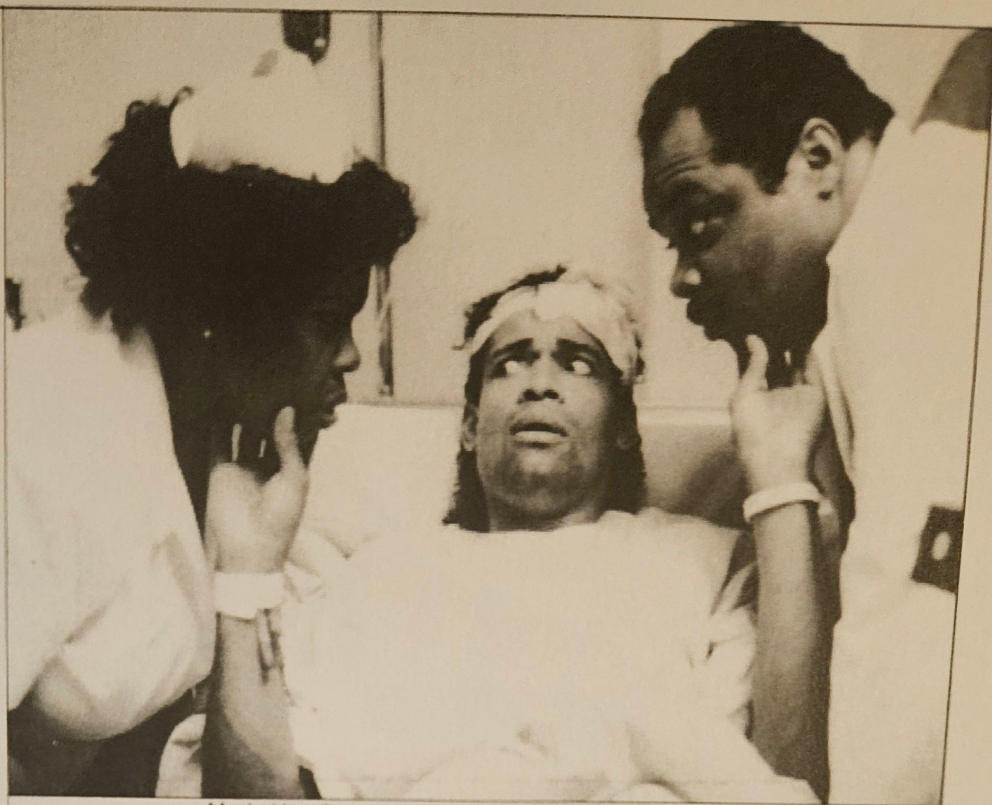
"I'm not making fun of these people," argues Van Peebles. "We've got to keep looking in that mirror and seeing how funny we look. If art shows us our backsides, it's probably doing the right thing."

The health and vivaciousness of black filmmaking depends upon the filmmakers' willingness and ability to discuss their own community. The argument can be made that most black filmmakers who jab and joust in the Van Peebles iconoclastic tradition are products of the black middle class and, in a fashion similar to the Jewish community, enjoy the liberating effect of satirizing everything around them, including the good liberals who patronize them.

"Why did it take so many years for the film establishment to get interested in me again?" Van Peebles asks, as we sit there finding blind alleys at the end of each question. "It'll be interesting to see what comes of the retrospective at the Museum, but if you've got time, come with me to an audition. I've never been to one of these before, but it's for some series and it's done this way." Van Peebles bowing to doing things by the book?

We walk from his 57th Street apartment to the Paramount Building, up to the twenty-fifth floor. We enter a room peopled with black actors, and I realize that I recognize most of them from their roles as—ouch!—criminals.

Their response to seeing Van Peebles walk in the room is uproarious: "Mr. V.P.," "Hey, Melvin, my man!" The greetings involve hand and back slapping; clearly, they have enor-



Mario Van Peebles (center) in *Identity Crisis* (1989)

mous respect for this pioneer whose motivation for filmmaking was to liberate them from criminal stereotypes. His arrival seemed to galvanize and energize this hopeful, disparate group.

Waiting for him, I fell into conversation with a lawyer there with his actor brother. As Melvin returned, this Houston attorney said, "I'm going to do something I've never done before," and asked for a pen and paper. "May I have your autograph, Mr. Van Peebles?" Melvin signed, a request he usually notoriously refuses. "Thank you," the criminal lawyer said, "this is the kind of thing that reminds me of what it's all about and keeps me going when things get chilly in Texas."

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Some think Van Peebles's power as a cult hero has eclipsed his power as a filmmaker. Film was put aside for Wall Street in the mid-Eighties, when he became the first black trader on the American Stock Exchange. "I lost a bet, and I'm good for my word, so I taught myself to do this and, well, it was not unpleasant. I think those people treated me very

well. Down there, it's not about race, it's about money. They were curious and we joked about it, but I can't recall it ever being an issue. Sometimes I think it's because money has no content or morality the way art does, but I'm not sure. That doesn't sound right either." Van Peebles subsequently wrote a book about the stock market, a layman's guide called *Bold Money*.

A distinguished career as a television writer has kept his profile high, what with *Just an Old Sweet Song* about a black family from Detroit who go South, and a handful of lesser credits. This prompted James Monaco to speculate in *American Film Now* in 1984, "Van Peebles may be acceptable as a writer for television; his scripts can be filtered through program practices offices, producers, directors and editors. But it will be a long time before he will be allowed to direct." Which is why he has got in the habit of writing the music, the script, directing, acting, editing and raising the money himself, which requires years.

Van Peebles's latest ambition could put him back in the limelight of controversy. "I'm interested in making a film about the Black Panthers... and I'm not going to tell you my angle. It's about the right time, and nobody could do it the way I would. I think Mario should and could direct it. I think it will be an important film. Radical, as the kids say." His smile says a lot more than "radical." It says a baadasssss director's coming back to collect some dues.